

**Consul General Steve Walker's Remarks at Basrah Oil and Gas Show Dinner
International Hotel
Thursday, February 4; 7:00 PM**

Good evening Governor Nasrawi, Chairman Bazouni, Mr. Ali Fares and other esteemed members of the Provincial Council, representatives of the public and private sectors, fellow members of the diplomatic corps, ladies and gentlemen.

It is such an honor for me to be here – not just with all of you this evening, but in Basrah. As you all know, and as I have come to learn during my time here as the American Consul General, Basrah is an amazing place, the city the famous poet Kazim Al-Hajaj described as “the City of God, guarded by the rivers.”

The 6th Basrah Oil and Gas Conference and Exhibition this week has highlighted something important: that while Basrah is Iraq's economic capital, it is far more than that. This city has a rich and deep history. It has produced artists and poets famous throughout the Arab world. Its people are innovative and hard working. Getting to know Basrawis – from oil company executives to tribal leaders to intellectuals to party officials to NGO leaders and government officials – has been the high point of my diplomatic career.

The conference is about oil and gas and Basrah's critical role in this critical sector. But it is about much more than that. When we talk about Iraq's oil and gas sector what we're really talking about is Iraq's long-term security and prosperity. All of us here this evening, including my country, the United States, which has a strategic partnership with Iraq, are working to build a stable, secure, unified, and prosperous Iraq in which the rights of all its citizens are protected. Economic development is an essential part of this effort.

Let me say a few words about economic development.

Security is the main requirement. Iraq is currently fighting Da'esh, one of the most savage and violent terrorist groups the world has ever known. Despite frequent suggestions to the contrary that you may hear or read on social media, the United States is absolutely steadfast in its commitment to support the Iraqi government to see Daesh defeated. At the request of and in coordination with the Government of Iraq, the U.S-led Coalition has trained nearly 20,000 members of the Iraqi Security Forces and has provided over \$400 million in military assistance for the fight. The Coalition has launched more than 6,700 airstrikes in Iraq and thousands more in Syria. Thanks to this cooperation, approximately 40% of the populated territory

Da'esh previously controlled has been liberated. The United States is also the largest humanitarian donor to Iraq. We have provided over \$600 million to help the Government of Iraq care for its citizens who have been displaced as a result of the fighting. The U.S. is proud to lead the International Coalition in assisting the Iraqi Security Forces - including the Popular Mobilization Forces and Peshmerga - in the fight against Da'esh. The United States recognizes that Basrah has provided many of the volunteer forces that are defending Iraq from Da'esh. I send my condolences to Basrawis who have lost sons, husbands, brothers, and friends. Although the fight is not yet over, I can assure you of two things. First, Iraq is winning and Iraq will prevail. Second, the United States will not leave your side. We are in this fight together.

The second ingredient for economic development is robust private-sector investment and commercial activity. One of my most important duties as Consul General is to promote American business in Iraq. Please visit our booth at the conference – you can find there all sorts of useful information about doing business in and with the United States. I and my economic team – and the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad as well – are doing all we can to increase the presence of, and investment by, American companies in southern Iraq. The recent revitalization of the American Chamber of Commerce in Baghdad, my efforts to engage with business leaders and associations southern Iraq, the Basrah-Houston Sister City Agreement signed last year in Houston by Governor Nasrawi and the Mayor of Houston – all of these are designed to build ties of commerce, as well as of education, culture, and friendship between the United States and southern Iraq. I cannot understate the importance of people-to-people ties between our two countries. While Iraq is well known for its vast energy resources, it is also a country of tremendous human resources – I meet smart, creative, energetic and enterprising Iraqis each and every day. But Iraq cannot fully harness its energy resources without building on the great potential of its human resources. For this reason, the U.S. Consulate General in Basrah energetically supports Iraqis - particularly youth - through a variety of educational, English language, and job readiness programs in Basrah and across the country.

The third requirement for sustained economic development is reform. The competition to attract new foreign investors is a global one, and requires a stable and transparent investment climate. In 2015, Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Iraq 161 out of 168 countries. The message for Iraq is clear – there must be a major effort to root out corruption. And, there should be non-stop efforts to create a good business environment for international companies already operating here. This requires partnership and a constructive

dialogue among political and economic stakeholders. Decentralization is another important reform effort here, and we working with Iraq in this area as well, especially through the efforts of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Finally, we need to change the way we think. We no longer live in the 1950s. The era of colonialism is over. We live now in a globalized, interconnected world. And a highly competitive one. Creating a business environment that welcomes foreign investment as a key to economic development is not a form of “capitulation to the great powers.” International oil companies are partners, not enemies. The world is no longer divided into ideological blocks. Iraq should have healthy, friendly, and normal relations with all its neighbors. It should have many friends and partners. In the globalized economy, countries do not need to choose sides.

As I said at the beginning, I am very happy to be with you this evening. Thank you for inviting me. I’d like to conclude my remarks by noting what the poet Ben Abi A’niya Al-Muhalabi said about Basrah:

يا جنة فاقت الجنان
، فما
يعدلها قيمة ولا ثمن
ألفيتها فاتخذتها وطناً ،
إن فؤادي لمثلها وطن

